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ABSTRACT

Dialogue journal writing is a communicative language technique that can be used effectively in the English-as-a-second-language (ESL) classroom. In this approach, the teacher responds in writing to each journal entry by the student. It is a low-cost writing-fluency activity that is relatively easy to initiate and can provide an important bridge to the adult, English-discourse community. Student acquisition of writing skills under controlled conditions with individual attention is fostered. The technique can be used daily for intensive student/teacher interaction or less frequently for specific focus. Journal entries can be limited to class topics or include any issue of interest to the student. While the journals do not emphasize learning discrete language skills, they do teach vocabulary, grammar, and syntax, and the teacher's entries provide much comprehensible input. The method also de-emphasizes traditional student and teacher roles, since communication is the priority. In recent years there have been significant research findings supporting the use of dialogue journals as a teaching method for ESL students. (MSE)

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Dialogue Journals: A Tool for ESL Teaching

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DIALOGUE JOURNALS: A TOOL FOR ESL TEACHING

For a number of years, teachers have been quietly using dialogue journals in their teaching of writing. Dialogue journals differ from other student journals in that the teacher responds in writing to each entry by the student. Until recently, the use of dialogue journals has not been widely publicized. The increased attention given to dialogue journals as a teaching technique is largely due to the work of Jana Staton and her colleagues at the Center for Applied Linguistics, Washington, D.C. She says:

> The concept of dialogues in writing between teacher and student is a sound idea in terms of both theory and common sense. Dialogue journals are a teacher-developed rather than research-initiated practice which has only recently been studied (1983, p. 1).

As Staton suggests, dialogue journals have grown ~~about~~ out of the common-sense need that teachers felt was necessary for interaction with their students. Staton, herself, became interested in researching dialogue journal writing in 1979, when she was made aware of a sixth-grade teacher, Leslee Reed, who had been asking her students to carry on a daily written conversation with her for a number of years.

Dialogue journals also share the heritage of general journal writing in the teaching of English. Journals are often used in English courses as a means of promoting writing fluency and development of ideas. Fred D. White calls journals "an indispensable writer's tool," and adds that for this reason they ". . .should be taught in first-year composition courses" (1982,

p. 147). Sherry Banks describes journals as ". . .an extraordinarily valuable adjunct to improving student writing (1982, p. 159). Journals serve an expressive function in a language course. They allow students freedom to experiment with language. Dan Kirby and Tom Liner list three characteristics of journal writing which make it a valuable learning activity: (1) the journal is less structured and more subjective than most school writing; (2) students use journals to write about things that they are interested in; and (3) the audience of the journal is themselves (1981, p. 46). Dialogue journals, however, add a new dimension of real communication to journal writing.

As the name implies, interaction is a defining feature of dialogue journals. Kirby and Liner see the consideration of audience as highlighting an important difference between journals in general and dialogue journals. While both attempt to help students learn to express themselves in writing by reducing the demands of the rhetorical situation, dialogue journals have an audience, the teacher. Thus, while dialogue journals share the general benefits of journal writing, they have developed beyond general writing to provide for interaction.

There is no clear-cut definition of dialogue journals, but Staton identifies four essential features of dialogue journals:

1. A dialogue journal is a conversation is writing carried on over an extended length of time, with each partner having equal and frequent turns.

2. Each writer is free to initiate conversation on any topic of mutual and personal interest, expecting the other partner to comment on it.

3. The writers share external frames of reference and boundaries which determine the topics each feels free to

bring up, as in any mutual conversation.

4. A wide range of topics (not limited to academic topics) can be used. (1982a, p. 4)

The dialogue journal is a safe practice ground in which beginning writers can experiment and develop their writing abilities in a situation which is meaningful to them. James Moffett says, "Ideally, a student would write because he was intent on saying something for real reasons of his own and because he wanted to get certain effects on a definite audience" (1968, p. 193). Dialogue journals allow students to do this. They foster a growing interaction which generates real topics for a real audience (the teacher), and yet because the teacher focuses on communication not correction, dialogue journals allow the student to concentrate on meaning instead of form.

RESEARCH SUPPORTING THE USE OF DIALOGUE JOURNALS

Recent composition research for native speakers supports an approach to the teaching of writing in which beginning writers are given the opportunity to focus on meaning by limiting rhetorical concerns. Because ESL composition has been almost nonexistent until very recently, Ruth Spack and Catherine Sadow note that ESL teachers have ". . .looked for clarification and guidance to those writers, teachers, and researchers in native English-speaking contexts who were challenging the traditional method of teaching composition" (1983, p. 576). As early as 1976, noted researcher Vivian Zamel argued that ESL teachers could learn from research about native speaker composition: until that time the teaching of writing in ESL was still seen from a behaviorist perspective. She proposed that the act of composing

needs to become the result of a genuine desire to express one's feelings, experiences or reactions, all within a climate of encouragement. Dialogue journals are one method in which teachers can limit rhetorical concerns of writing for students and allow them to focus on meaning.

In the past five years, there has been significant research to verify the use of dialogue journals as a teaching method for both native speakers and students in the ESL setting. Two studies of dialogue journal writing have been conducted by the Center for Applied Linguistics (CAL). In the first study, Staton and her fellow researchers analyzed the text of 26 student/teacher dialogue journals from Leslee Reed's sixth-grade classroom from July,1980 to January, 1982 (1982a). The study attempted first to determine how students reacted to the freedom from constraints provided by dialogue journal writing over traditional classroom writing exercises. The study was also designed to see if dialogue journal writing had any negative consequences on the grammatical correctness of the students' writing.

Perhaps the most important conclusion of this study is that dialogue journals can serve as a natural and functional bridge for young writers to begin to make the transition from oral speech to written communication. "Our strongest recommendation for the use of dialogue journals, " says Staton, "is as an initial developmental step for beginning writers to provide extensive opportunity for successful communication in written language before asking them to try a more complex form" (1982a, p. 133). By focusing attention on communication, dialogue

journals limit rhetorical concerns to the minimum needed for communication. Dialogue journals allow fledgling writers to have extensive writing experience which is at their own level and yet is a real communicative experience. Roger Shuy, who also participated in this study, concludes that dialogue journals are an effective tool for learning to write because they mimic conversation better than any other type of school writing and because the tasks and topics are both real and student-generated (1982a, p. 20). Joy Kreeft, another participant in the CAL study, adds that dialogue journal writing incorporates both ". . .the interactive aspect of oral face-to-face communication and the solitary aspect of expository writing" (1982, p. 8). In the area of surface correctness, the study focussed on spelling. Although no corrections were made in the student's journals, their spelling in their journal writing generally improved while performance on spelling tests remained constant (1982a, p. 121).

The second CAL study was focussed mainly on ESL students. The 27 participants were pre-adolescents. They represented 12 countries and 10 languages with only two native speakers of English. The subjects had from zero to six years of classroom exposure to English. By analyzing the journals of these 27 students, taught by Leslee Reed, Kreeft discovered that the journals allowed Reed to monitor the progress of each student daily (Kreeft, 1983, p. 3). She also notes that the journals allowed Reed to adjust to each student's level individually instead of starting at some pre-determined level of language competence (1983, p. 10). In short, dialogue journals allowed

the teacher to individualize instruction in a way which is impossible in teacher-fronted situations. Summarizing both CAL studies, Kreeft says:

> The process of dialogue journal allows students learning a second language to learn in a manner very similar to the way that a first language is learned--by discovering the rules of language form and use in the context of real, learner-generated communication (1983, p. 12).

DIALOGUE JOURNALS IN ESL METHODOLOGY

The use of dialogue journals is consistent with a communicative language learning approach to teaching ESL. By definition, dialogue journals are a communicative language event since the focus is always on meaning. Both parties in the dialogue generate and respond to real topics.

The communicative nature of dialogue journal writing is most clearly seen in the examination of the student and teacher roles. As Staton states, in dialogue journals:

> Student and teacher both drop for a moment their customary roles. Through searching for and finding a mutually interesting topic, they are able to talk directly as friends do. . .Mutual conversations are clear evidences of the 'co-membership' status of student and teacher in the journals. (1982a, p. 101)

When the teacher focuses only on communication and does not correct errors, the students see that the teacher regards communication as the priority. Thus, the traditional teacher/student roles are de-emphasized in the dialogue journal experience.

Dialogue journal writing also shares a holistic understanding of learning with communicative language learning. Shuy (1981) describes this type of teaching approach as constructive, based on the Kantian assumption that people come to know their world by actively constructing it rather than passively taking it in. As they write in their journals, students are actively engaged in creating meaning through language. This corroborates James Moffett´s belief that students need to have an active role in the learning process. He argues that any type of teacher feedback about the student´s performance will not be effective if the student´s ". . .will is not behind his actions, for will is the motor that drives the whole process" (1968, p. 191). Dialogue journals encourage students to take control, to become actively engaged in interaction with a supportive friend, thus allowing students acquire language in the context of their own communication.

I should note here that while dialogue journals do not emphasize learning discrete language skills, they do teach vocabulary, grammar, and syntax. The teacher is constantly modeling correct grammar, spelling and word usage for the students. The teacher´s entries in the journal provide a wealth of comprehensible input for the students. Because the focus of the journals is communication, the teacher must adjust his/her input to the level of each student. Instead of circling errors in red ink, the teacher elicits change by modeling correct usage in his/her response.

SUGGESTIONS FOR USE

In this section, the suggestions and procedures of teachers who have used dialogue journals are discussed in the following four areas: introducing journal writing to the class, evaluation of students' journal writing, protecting the privacy of journal entries, and limitation and variations of dialogue journals for specific purposes. Also, some specific suggestions for managing dialogue journals from two ESL teachers are reproduced in the appendix.

It is almost always necessary for the teacher to first introduce journal writing to students. Fred White advises that for most students any type of writing is unnatural, therefore ". . .students must be guided into the journal, must become aware of its immense possibilities, its traditions, and its usefulness" (1982, p. 147). White's suggestions about journals apply to dialogue journals, which are even more unfamiliar to students. Students need to know from the outset the purpose of the dialogue journal. Spack and Sadow warn that some ESL students do not feel that writing on personal topics is appropriate for school writing (1983, p. 579). Thus the teacher must not only make the communicative nature of the dialogue journals clear, but he/she will also often have to sell the student on the value of dialogue journal writing. Even if the teacher does a good sales job, he/she should not be surprised to find that the students do not feel comfortable writing about personal topics at first. It takes time to build relationships in which students feel comfortable initiating personal topics.

Because dialogue journals are a communicative event, they

cannot be graded in the sense that essays can be graded. Any evaluation of them should enhance rather than deter students' motivation to communicate. In short, if any type of grade must be given for dialogue journal work, it should encourage and reward consistent effort to communicate and not pass judgement on content or grammatical correctness.

Privacy is another issue which should be discussed with students when dialogue journals are introduced. In the first CAL study, absolute privacy between teacher and student was guaranteed from the beginning. Staton says, "This guarantee of privacy becomes an essential element in sustaining and deepening the communication as the year progresses" (1982a, p. 19). Trust is essential to the development of a real communicative relationship between the student and the teacher. However, there will also be times when the teacher wants to share students' journal entries with the entire class. A simple solution is for the teacher to make it clear to the students he/she will always ask a student's permission before sharing any of the student's writing with the class or anyone else. Students' privacy may be further protected by having entries typed and deleting names and other identifying elements.

In a variation of dialogue journal writing proposed by Spack and Sadow, privacy is not really an issue. They suggest that journal writing in the ESL writing class can be limited to topics related to the class. They argue that personal writing can become too egocentric to be of value and that it can become too personal and thus difficult for the teacher to make adequate

responses (1983, p. 579). This limitation is worth considering because it focuses the activity while still allowing it to be a communicative event.

Marsha Markman (1984) suggests using dialogue journals as a means for students to air their feelings about the course. This is another example of using the dialogue journal as a communicative event on a focussed theme. If topic limitations are placed on dialogue journal writing, it is important to allow enough latitude that students feel that they are in control of the subjects on which they write. Also, since by definition dialogue journals require frequent interaction, topics cannot be so limited that students feel that they have nothing to say.

CONCLUSION

In summary, dialogue journal writing is a communicative language event which can be used effectively in the ESL classroom. It is a low cost writing fluency activity that is both relatively easy to initiate and yet can provide an important bridge into the adult, English discourse community. It fosters student acquisition of writing skills in a controlled atmosphere with individualized attention. Dialogue journals are a flexible fluency tool which can be used on a daily basis for intensive student/teacher interaction or less frequently in specified areas. Staton says that dialogue journals are ". . .not a method of instruction in literacy for language learners, but. . .a valuable component in developing writing and reading competence in both first and second language classes" (1983, p. 1).

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